

On Plagiarism-Dissolving: a Research Note

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Abstract:

Plagiarism has been frequently discussed both as a research topic and as a key concern in the real-world business education setting. This paper conducts a literature review on plagiarism and highlights the soft complexity nature underlying the plagiarism theme. It maintains that dissolving, based on Ackoff's Interactive Planning methodology, rather than solving or resolving the plagiarism problem is more effective, given this nature of soft complexity of plagiarism. To dissolve plagiarism by a teacher alone, however, is too demanding to ask for. Nevertheless, by making use of the digital social media ecosystem to provide a stimulating e-learning environment to students, a teacher, as a gardener in cyberspace, is still able to contribute to the plagiarism-dissolving process.

Key words: Ackoff's Interactive Planning methodology, Systems thinking, Plagiarism, e-learning support, Digital social media ecosystem, Management education.

Introduction

The topic of plagiarism is pervasive in the education sector: news on plagiarism comes up from time to time; plagiarism has been committed by students and by academics; the topic of plagiarism has been frequently raised at staff meetings at educational institutions that have been participated by this writer as a part-time teacher on business subjects. This prompts the writer to conduct a review on the problem of

plagiarism. In this paper, such a review is conducted with a systems thinking lenses, and mainly from the standpoint of a teacher in the business education field.

An overview on plagiarism based on literature review

The literature on plagiarism is quite substantial. To begin with, Roberts (2008) has a good collection of papers on plagiarism. Papers on plagiarism and, more generally, student dishonesty have been published in academic journals such as *Journal of Business Ethics* (Springer) and *Journal of Academic Ethics* (Springer) from time to time. Public websites, such as Plagiarismadvice (2014) and the Plagiarism Resource Site (2014), provide comprehensive information on the nature of the plagiarism problem, plagiarism solutions, advice on anti-plagiarism as well as academic readings on plagiarism. University websites and software vendors on plagiarism detection software are yet other obvious sources of information on plagiarism. Besides, there are videos on plagiarism in Youtube (also see the writer's Facebook Photo Album (Joseph KK Ho) on Plagiarism (Ho, 2014a).).

It is useful to examine the topic of plagiarism in terms of (i) definitions and nature of plagiarism, (ii) types of plagiarism (iii) causes of plagiarism, and (iv) solutions on plagiarism. On item (i) *definitions and nature of plagiarism*, the following definitions are typical:

- “Plagiarism is defined as the unacknowledged use, as one's own, of work of another person, whether or not such work has been published” (The University of Hong Kong 2014)
- “Plagiarism is the copying or paraphrasing of other people's work or ideas into your own work without full acknowledgement. All published and unpublished material, whether in manuscript, printed or electronic form, is covered under this definition. Collusion is another form of plagiarism involving the unauthorised

collaboration of students (or others) in a piece of work.” (University of Oxford 2024)

- “Plagiarism occurs when a student, with intent to deceive or with reckless disregard for proper scholarly procedures, presents any information, ideas or phrasing of another as if they were his/her own and/or does not give appropriate credit to the original source.” (Duke University 2014)
- “The definition of plagiarism includes copying of the whole or parts of written assignments, programming exercises, reports, quiz papers, mid-term examinations and final examinations.” (The Chinese University of Hong Kong 2014)

The definitions above are very similar on their views on the nature of plagiarism. Nevertheless, there are still ambiguities on the plagiarism nature, the main one being that it is not clear how a plagiarism case is to be established in practice. For example, there is no hard and fast rule to say that, if the similarity index in a Turnitin report (Turnitin is an anti-plagiarism software) (Turnitin 2014) is beyond certain level, the case of plagiarism is clearly established for follow-up by an educational institution. As a document on “How to view and interpret the Turnitin® similarity score and originality reports” says, “Plagiarism is an academic judgement, and Turnitin makes no attempt to judge whether plagiarism has occurred...” (ucla.ac.uk, 2009).

As a part-time teacher in Hong Kong, making feedbacks on students’ assignment reports for an overseas Degree study program bears some risk. It is because this writer might assure a student that his/her report has insignificant plagiarism problem, only to be subsequently overruled by an overseas second marker, who recommends penalty for the student’s plagiarism. In addition, there are four incompatible discourses on plagiarism, according to Kaposi and Dell (2012), namely, *plagiarism as moralism*, *plagiarism as proceduralism*, *plagiarism as development* and *plagiarism as writing/ inter-*

textuality. Each of these discourses holds a different view on the fundamental nature of plagiarism with dissimilar implications on preferred solutions to address plagiarism. Briefly, *plagiarism as moralism* treats plagiarism as theft; *plagiarism as proceduralism* considers plagiarism as inappropriate behavior; *plagiarism as development* views the plagiarism issue as “writing ... necessarily be contextualized in terms of development” (Kaposi and Dell, 2012); finally, *plagiarism as writing/ inter-textuality*'s main concern is not “whether there is such a thing as unintentional plagiarism, but how various intentions and identities may be negotiated in writing.” (Kaposi and Dell 2012); in short, “extreme cases aside, it is ... not clear at all what does and what does not count as plagiarism..” (Kaposi and Dell 2012).

On item (ii) *types of plagiarism*, the following ones are noted based on Roberts (2008), iThenticate (2014a; 2014b), and Garg and Singh (2014):

- Cyber-plagiarism
- Self plagiarism
- Plagiarism of secondary sources
- Deliberate plagiarism or unintentional plagiarism
- Patchwriting (which is not quite plagiarism but is viewed as a dishonest writing technique)

As the descriptions of these plagiarism types can be easily found via an Internet search, they are not provided here.

On item (iii) *causes of plagiarism*, Roberts (2008) offers the following ones: (a) confusion about how to cite sources, (b) misconceptions about terminology, (c) pressure (including pressure to publish (iThenticate 2014b), (d) poor time management and organizational skills, and (e) product-oriented writing assignments. Besides, two main contextual causes have been raised in the literature: technological advancements that make plagiarism easier and the cheating culture (Crittenden *et al.* 2009).

On item (iv) *solutions on plagiarism*, the writer notes the following three, based on Roberts (2008):

- (a) *solution 1*: the educational approach on students, e.g. on writing skills, see HKIED (2014)
- (b) *solution 2*: the assessment design approach, e.g. designing assignments that do not have standardized answers
- (c) *solution 3*: the formal approach on detecting and penalizing plagiarism, e.g. using plagiarism-detection software

In reality, the discussion on plagiarism solutions needs to cover the internal resources available in an educational institution to adopt these solutions as well as the perceived severity of the plagiarism problem by the educational institution concerned. From the writer's experience, *solution 1* (the educational approach) works reasonably well to reduce unintentional plagiarism. Nevertheless, there are always some students who, when caught with plagiarism acts, complain that their teachers have not taught the topic of plagiarism or they could not remember that their teachers have told them clearly what is plagiarism; as to *solution 2* (the educational approach), when the study program is based on traditional management education approach as described by Willmott (1997), the ease and risk of plagiarism increase because assignment answers tend to be relatively standardized; for *solution 3* (the formal approach on detecting and penalizing plagiarism), all educational institutions have formal procedures to detect and penalize plagiarism, but the actual practices by these institutions differ, depending on a number of factors such as the availability of administrative resources and the determination to combat plagiarism. A recent email from an educational centre to its part-timer teachers, as received by this writer, is illustrative: "Hi All, Last week, we sent out a notification informing you that there would be a tutor workshop on about Plagiarism and Using Turnitin, however, we have had no response yet. We have identified that at the very least some assignments that have been submitted on through turnitin

have been heavily plagiarised but no action has been taken. We feel that plagiarism might be going un-noticed so we would like a large proportion of our tutors to turn up to this workshop

Some of the factors under items (i) to (iv) are mainly of the nature of “how to”, especially on how to combat plagiarism – which are relatively straightforward to understand. Others are more controversial (or inter-subjective), arising from the perceptive nature of plagiarism: different stakeholders, e.g. teachers, administrative staff, education centre owners, etc., with their respective interests, personal values and differential cultural influences, do respond to the plagiarism concern differently. In short, the topic of plagiarism makes up a problem situation with soft complexity; plagiarism, except for mild and unintentional plagiarism acts, is not a clearly bound problem that can be effectively addressed by reductionist methods. Thus, the ensuing section examines plagiarism from a Soft Systems Perspective, notably with the notions of resolving, solving and dissolving problems from Ackoff (1981)’s version of Soft Systems methodology known as Interactive Planning (also see Flood and Jackson (1981; chapter 7) for further details on Interactive Planning).

A systems thinking perspective to address plagiarism

To address a problem, as Ackoff (1981) explains to us, one can adopt one of the following three approaches [the quotations below are from Ackoff (1981)]:

The first approach: *To resolve the problem:*

- The goal is “to select a means that yields an outcome that is good enough”
- It “relies heavily on past experience and current trial and error for its inputs”
- “it is rooted deeply in common sense”

The second approach: *To solve the problem:*

- The goal is “ to select a means that is believed to yield the best possible outcome, that optimizes”

- It is “largely based on scientific methods, techniques, and tools”
- It “relies heavily on observation and measurement”

The third approach: *To dissolve the problem*:

- The goal is “to change the nature of either the entity that has it or alter its environment in order to remove the problem”
- “Problem dissolvers idealize because their objective is to change the system involved, or its environment, to bring it closer to an ultimately desired state”

As the problem of plagiarism exhibits soft complexity, the third approach offers a more effective means to address the messy plagiarism problem by trying to dissolve it. The first two approaches are considered reductionist in orientation in this case, which are less capable to address messy problems. [Readers who are interested in the topic of the relative strengths and weaknesses of various systems methodologies are referred to Flood and Jackson (1991; Chapter 2).] However, to dissolve a problem in a specific organizational setting would require various stakeholders’ participation in an Interactive Planning process (Ackoff 1981). Because of that, further research based on Action Research with Interactive Planning employment will provide more useful knowledge on the application of the third approach to address plagiarism. [Ackoff’s Interactive Planning methodology endorses soft systems thinking, with three operating principles, namely, (i) the participative principle, (ii) the continuity principle, and (iii) the holistic principle. And, soft systems methodologies have more explicit guidance to cope with soft complexity.] Now, this paper turns to discuss a few aspects of the problem-dissolving approach as identified by Ackoff (1981). These aspects are related to (i) the nature of the *entities*, (ii) the attempt to alter the *environment*, as well as (iii) the *ideal* underlying an idealized design.

On the nature of *entities* in “problem dissolving”, what the writer has in mind are students’ prevailing learning mindset and the traditional management education approach. To dissolve plagiarism, besides other forms of cheating, e.g. contract cheating, which are not conducive to students’ genuine intellectual learning, many of the students’ current learning mindset needs to be changed so as to embrace intellectual curiosity more, rather than focusing too much on how to obtain a recognized academic qualification within a short period of time. In this regard, one way being worked on by the writer is to provide a stimulating social media-based learning environment to cultivate students’ intellectual learning interest, see Ho (2013a and 2013b). Such kind of effort directed at students’ learning can be considered as belonging to solution 1 on plagiarism (*the educational approach on students*). The traditional management education approach, which sees the world as “an exterior “object” to be learned about” and “self-development is unimportant” (Willmott 1997), could indirectly steer some students to plagiarise or cheat in other ways. Furthermore, the writer recommends the adoption of education approaches based more on action learning and critical action learning as propounded by Willmott (1997). These management education approaches endorse the views that:

- (i) “...the world is a contiguous “subject” to act upon and change” (for Action Learning) and “... the world is a contiguous psychopolitical field of action and change” (for Critical Action Learning) (Willmott 1997)
- (ii) “... Learners should be facilitated by a tutor to solve problems” (for Action Learning) and “Learners are potentially receptive to, and facilitated by, the concerns of other group, in addition to individual tutors, when identifying and addressing problems” (for Critical Action Learning) (Willmott 1997)
- (iii) “self-learning is very important” (for Action Learning) and “..Self-development and social development are interdependent.” (for Critical Action Learning)

(Willmott 1997)

Such non-traditional management approaches can be considered as belonging to both solution 1 (the educational approach) as well as solution 2 on plagiarism (*the assessment design approach*), but are more profound. For one thing, learning deliverables and assessment for Action Learning and Critical Action Learning are so contextualized, unique and process-based that plagiarism is neither easy nor meaningful to carry out. At the same time, Action Learning, especially in the form of Critical Action Learning, is very useful to develop students into critically reflexive practitioners, as described by Cunliffe (2004). [Cunliffe (2004) recommends other ways to develop critically reflexive practitioners, not Action Learning and Critical Action Learning.] These suggestions by the writer work on (i) the nature of *entities*, i.e. students' learning mindset and management education content and assessment methods, (ii) the *environment*, i.e. the e-learning environment, as well as (iii) the ideal underlying an idealized design, i.e. an *ideal* that supports critically reflexive management education to promote human self-actualization. These are the main aspects of Ackoff's problem-dissolving approach.

Implications on teaching in the digital social media era

To combat the cheating culture, which fosters plagiarism, by a part-time teacher alone may be too much to ask for. In the same vein, the influence of a part-time teacher, such as this writer, to change the traditional management education approach in a specific business study program that he/she is involved in is admittedly small. Nevertheless, the writer for one finds it quite feasible to offer a stimulating digital social media environment on a long-term basis to cultivate students' interest in intellectual learning. The writer has been making use of Facebook, Google +, Blogger and Youtube to support students' learning for more than three years, which has been reported in

Ho (2013a). The e-learning support practice provides a virtual e-learning support platform which enables students to access academic resources with their PCs, mobile phones and tablets. These students are able to do so even after finishing their subjects taught by this writer. These days, mobile phones and tablets are very important touchpoints with students. Making learning materials in different business subjects available via an integrated digital social media platform is intended to foster in students integrative thinking as recommended by Latham *et al.* (2004), who see integrative thinking capacity as relevant for meeting “the complex business challenges of the 21st century” (Lantham *et al.* 2004). The social media-based e-learning platform, as maintained by the writer, includes Facebook groups on social sciences, marketing, accounting and finance, strategic management, human resource management, business research methods and systems thinking in management, etc.

With this e-learning support practice, the writer takes up multiple roles as a mentor, a teacher and a friend to the students. A related term used by Coppola *et al.* (2002), cited by May and Short (2003), to describe the new role is “Digital Socrates”. For Whiting and de Janasz (2004), “Student-protégés utilize mentoring relationship to ask questions and develop networks, while increasing the connection between course concepts and “the real world.” Often students maintain their relationship after the course, and some supplement this relationship with face-to-face contact....” This is what this writer has been doing with the e-learning platform over the last three years. It is intended that, with this intellectually stimulating virtual environment, some of these students will then be able to develop their intellectual competence over time. This e-learning support venture reflects a “gardening approach in cyberspace” on management education as proposed by May and Short (2003). In their own words, “Gardening is about attitude... You cannot make a flower grow and bloom. All you can do as a gardener is to create an environment that helps the plant to reach its potential. Likewise, in teaching, you cannot

make a student learn. All you can do is create an environment that fosters learning and personal growth.” (May and Short 2003).

This writer finds that creating, maintaining and delivering study materials to students in the digital social media platform very convenient: the writer’s own lecture notes and related study materials, some in multimedia form, e.g. from Youtube, can be linked together online to enrich students learning experience in an integrative mode. This e-learning platform and related practices are illustrated in Exhibits 1 to 3.

As shown in Exhibits 1 and 2, teaching materials can be handily maintained with desktop computers at home and in schools’ classrooms. [The writer does not use smart phone or tablet to maintain and develop study materials in the digital social media platform because these devices are not convenient to use for this purpose and the writer is not skillful enough to do so.] As to Exhibit 3, lecture materials on the Facebook Photo Album can be projected onscreen during the class to support in-class teaching (also see an example of a Facebook Album on lecture notes at Ho (2014b)). This e-learning support facility is built on the digital social media platform, comprising Facebook, Google+, Blogger and Youtube, and its usage is free-of-charge.

Exhibit 1: A computer screen showing the writer's Facebook Photo Album on a subject's lecture materials, with attached videos from Youtube.



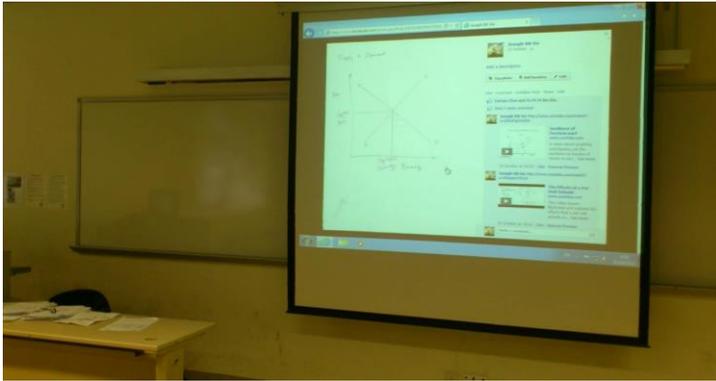
Maintaining and developing teaching materials in Facebook's Photo Albums is mainly done with the writer's PC at home.

Exhibit 2: Reviewing lecture notes, with attached Youtube videos in the Photo Album of the writer's Facebook, in a classroom computer.



The review of lecture notes by this writer in the classroom is done just before the class starts. Thus, the classroom is still empty.

Exhibit 3: Lecture notes, with attached videos, is shown onto a projector screen in the classroom, to support in-class lecturing



During a lecture in classroom, conventional lecturing by the writer is supplemented with Powerpoint slideshow and Youtube videos as attached to the writer's Facebook Photo Albums. When students get sleepy in class, the writer would consider to show them an entertaining video related to the lecture topic. For a detailed account of the e-learning support by this writer and the underlying rationale, readers are referred to Ho (2013a).

Concluding remarks

In summary, using the digital social media ecosystem to support students' learning can be a useful teaching strategy by a teacher to change the mindset of students to that of a critically reflexive practitioner as well as to change the learning environment of students, which, in turn, helps in dissolving plagiarism. Such an approach essentially downplays the traditional classroom model of management education while embracing the *gardening in cyberspace* metaphor of May and Short (2003). [For May and Short (2003), gardening practices are further explained in terms of guidance on positioning, soil conditioning, watering and controlling weeds, pests, and diseases.] At the same time, this approach also requires changes in the teaching mindset and practices of teachers to

become a cyberspace gardener.

The e-learning approach supports an idealized design on management education in a specific organizational setting, based on Ackoff's Interactive Planning methodology, while, at the same time, endorsing critically reflexive management education as well as gardening in cyberspace. However, it is beyond the ambition of this paper to conduct Action Research with Interactive Planning application on this topic further. Finally, in this paper, the discussion on management education, as related to plagiarism, also sheds light on the research topic of Enlightening Management Education as postulated by Ho (2013c).

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